

## **ECE Teachers' Perceptions of Evidence-Based PD and Intensive Coaching**

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The instruction children receive from their early childcare and education (ECE) teachers through close relationships heavily impacts child learning and development, including emotional and social well-being, adaption to formal schooling, academic achievement, and overall life course trajectories (Brebner et al., 2015; Denham, 2006; Owen et al., 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Unfortunately, the training that influences these meaningful learning interactions is lacking. Many ECE teachers are without the proper educational training or professional development (PD) needed to foster these formative learning environments due to lack of access and funding, inconsistent requirements and developmental opportunities, and low compensation for participating in PD opportunities; all of which that can lead to teacher turnover and burnout (Cancio et al., 2014; Lauermann & König, 2016; Phillips et al., 2016). This can lead to lower quality interactions with children, an increase of child stress, and disruptions in learning and development (Hatfield & Williford, 2017). Furthermore, the effect of this deficit is most felt in marginalized communities where the absence of high-quality care can add to the educational disparities experienced by vulnerable infants and children (Layzer & Burstein, 2007; Campbell et al., 2014; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005).

In order to ensure children are provided with positive learning and developmental experiences, support, in the form of evidence-based training and programs, must be provided to *all* ECE educators, regardless of background and/or demographic. Cash et al. (2019) stated that training in child development, including responsive caregiving and best practices for ECE, are essential for promoting positive child outcomes and preparing children to transition into formal schooling. Research has also found that when teachers are equipped with the skills necessary to

help children attain optimal outcomes, teachers' confidence and efficacy are strengthened; thus improving the overall outcomes of students within the classroom (Gebbie et al., 2012; Nolan & Molla, 2017). Although evidenced-based PD offers unique learning opportunities to ECE teachers, coaching has been found as an additional learning tool that not only positively impacts teachers' instructional practice, but positively influences students' academic achievement as well (Kraft et al., 2018). Pairing online, evidence-based PD with coaching practice can significantly impact the teaching practices and procedures utilized with children in the classroom to promote children's growth and development and fortify teacher confidence and efficacy as well.

### **Present Study**

As ChildCare Aware (2018) emphasized promoting child development through ongoing PD of ECE teachers, understanding their perspectives on professional development and coaching opportunities can allow for the enhancement of continuing education strategies that benefit the holistic development of children. To that effect, the purpose of this study was to examine ECE teachers' perceptions of a specialized PD training that combined evidence-based online modules with intensive coaching support. Previous research has established coaching as a key factor of PD that enhances teachers' knowledge, skill, and education level, as well as assists with putting knowledge into practice (Kraft et al., 2018; Whitebook et al., 2018). As these professional partnerships are most effective when strong, supportive relationships are formed between both actors (Artman-Meeker et al., 2015), determining the perspectives of ECE teachers' involvement in these relationships can aid in determining factors that provide high levels of support for teachers to influence optimal child outcomes.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The analytic sample included 23 participating ECE teachers who consented to be part of a research study examining the project. All participating teachers worked as infant, toddler, or preschool teachers in low or unrated centers that provide publicly funded childcare. Teachers had no formalized credentials beyond a high school diploma or GED, and hence no foundational training in ECE concepts. Recruitment involved contacting directors via Future Ready Columbus' (FRC) events, phone, e-mail, or center visits. Directors provided researchers access to contact center staff for program involvement. All participants in the study received small incentives. In total, for research participation, teachers received two \$20 gift cards after completing the course content cycles and the posttest survey.

### **Procedures**

The sample was drawn from the Virtual Lab School (VLS) Momentum pilot: a comprehensive, high- quality, research based ECE training system provided through online training and practice-based coaching in partnership with FRC, the city of Columbus, Ohio, and The Ohio State University. This study included surveys of teacher experiences after completing an online, evidence-based PD and subsequent coaching. Teachers consenting to the study completed some or all 21 content and coaching cycles (Figure 1), where coaches observed teachers and met in person, or during Covid-19, where coaches and teachers had extensive phone or virtual face time conversations, on an average of two to four times per course cycle. After participating in this professional development opportunity for 10 to 12 months, posttest surveys were administered to teachers to gain their perceptions of their experiences with coaches, and how their partnered relationship influenced their practices and confidence within the classroom.

## Measures

At the conclusion of the program, consented participants were invited to complete a posttest survey, either in paper or online, that included several questions to gauge teachers' perceptions of the coaching they received (e.g., "In general, the coaching sessions helped me better understand and apply the information from the online training."). Teachers answered these questions on a 1 (Strong disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) Likert type scale. Analysis examined response frequencies, means, and standard deviations using SPSS.

## Results

Table 1 displays participant demographics for the larger VLS Momentum study and Table 2 displays the statistics for the key variables of interest. Regarding these, ECE teachers held positive perceptions of coaching that not only influenced their practices in the classroom but encouraged them to continue their educational development.

Results (Table 2) showed that 78% of ECE teachers strongly agreed ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = .42$ ) their coaching sessions helped them better understand and apply the information from online training. 87% of teachers strongly agreed ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = .34$ ) that their coach taught them concepts that will help them become a better teacher. Namely, intensive coaching strengthened teachers' self-efficacy, knowledge, and application of evidence-based practices within the classroom. In addition, 74% of teachers strongly agreed ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = .45$ ) that they formed a strong, professional relationship with their coach and 70% strongly agreed ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = .47$ ) professional and personal challenges were discussed within the coaching relationship. That is, coaching served as a form of relational support for teachers who were working through job-related and/or personal stressors while managing the needs of children in their care. Lastly, 61% strongly agreed ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = .59$ ) that their coach prepared them for the Child Development

Associate (CDA) process, suggesting that coaching encouraged teachers to continue in their educational development.

### **Discussion**

This study found that teachers held positive perceptions of intensive coaching after completing an online, evidenced-based professional development training. Distinguishing teachers' experiences of practice-based coaching can allow for the identification of key factors that support ECE teachers' learning and influence the instruction children receive within the early care setting. Acknowledging the importance of relationships in adult learning and coaching's impact on confidence and functional training can assist researchers, mentor educators, and practitioners in designing continuing education opportunities that holistically support ECE teachers' experiences within the classroom as they aim to incorporate novel and effective strategies into their practice.

We often emphasize that children's learning takes place in relationships (Brebner et al., 2015); these findings substantiate the importance of considering how adult learning and development is impacted by relationships as well. This can be evidenced by teachers' indication of coaching relationships serving as forms of academic, social, and emotional support. These collaborative relationships helped extend learning taught within the Course Completion Cycle by maintaining a level of professional respect, utilizing teacher ideas in classroom growth and development, and conversing with teachers when challenges, barriers, or personal/professional stressors infringed upon providing quality care within the classroom. Our findings may suggest that the professional growth and development of teachers is not solely based on the evidenced-based curriculum provided in PD opportunities, but that a deeper sense of learning may occur

through the formation of relationships with instructors and/or mentors that can provide hands-on support and guidance of innovative concepts.

Our findings suggest that coaching can increase teachers' confidence and ability to utilize concepts learned in training by providing real-time assistance and learning opportunities when applying new models and ideas in the classroom. As teacher confidence has been noted as an essential component of effective practice and student outcomes (Nolan & Molla, 2017), coaching can be seen as a vital aid to the professional identity of ECE teachers that allows them to soundly apply and master newfound skills within their classrooms. By transferring new knowledge to ECE educators and supporting the incorporation of new practices by real-time, reciprocal, and practical feedback, teachers can gain the confidence that is needed to execute new methods and procedures that benefit the growth and well-being of the children in their care.

We also found that coaching can support ECE teachers' foundational training by increasing teacher efficacy, reenforcing fundamental concepts, helping staff to appropriately apply what they have learned, and encouraging ongoing participation in continuing education. Teachers' perceived coaching as an aid to applying new knowledge in the classroom, as a mechanism that helped them become a better teacher, and a resource that helped prepare them for the CDA process. Through each of these factors, coaching allows for the growth and development of teacher efficacy, or a teacher's beliefs about his or her effect within the ECE setting (Gebbie et al., 2012). By providing supplemental coaching following online PD courses, teachers may feel more secure in the training received through the reinforcement of new concepts and practice focused on meeting children's needs. Positive developmental or learning moments like these may make it easier for teachers to envision themselves successfully

participating in further training that can support their professional endeavors by beginning and completing the CDA process.

### **Future Directions**

Our results suggest that ECE teachers can be better supported in consistent professional development and further supplemented with coaching. Coaching can increase teachers' confidence and ability to utilize concepts learned in training by providing real-time assistance and learning opportunities when applying new models and ideas in the classroom. Coaching can also support ECE teachers' foundational training by increasing teacher efficacy, reenforcing fundamental concepts, helping staff to appropriately apply what they have learned, and encouraging ongoing participation in continuing education.

Future research should examine the specific attributes of coaching (e.g., identifying strengths, modeling, reflective questioning, observational feedback) that help ECE teachers successfully implement practices. Although coaching was positively perceived by ECE teachers, the exact components of this instructional practice that positively influenced teacher learning were not identified. Future studies focused on examining the specific attributes of coaching can help researchers, mentor educators, and practitioners identify the precise aspects of coaching that help ECE teachers feel connected to and respected by coaches, as well as supported in order to overcome barriers and confidently implement new skills and strategies within the classroom.

Future research should also assess how different ECE teachers may be differentially affected by the coaching intervention to ensure the training is supportive of a variety of educators, regardless of background and/or demographic. As ECE teachers are of varied ethnicities, educational backgrounds, socioeconomic status, learning styles, etc., tailoring coaching practices and confirming they are culturally responsive to meet the distinct needs of various ECE

professionals is essential to ensuring teachers are equipped to meet the differentiated needs of children in care. Equipping coaches with the tools and resources necessary to meet the needs of ECE teachers and prepare them with the quality education necessary to provide high-quality care can ensure that coaching continues to benefit ECE professionals as they transition through their careers. Examining the ways in which coaching may look different in varying ECE settings can ensure that practices utilized with educators are not generalized, overlooking the unique traits and qualities each practitioner brings to the classroom.

Lastly, future research should explore how positive coaching relationships may influence the relationships ECE teachers form with children. As relationships with coaches were perceived as an asset to teachers' furthering of their education, examining the impact of this relationship on teacher relationships with children can highlight the indirect effects coaching may have on children's outcomes within the ECE setting. Identifying this association can further support the impact of coaching on ECE teachers' success within the classroom as well as establishing coaching as a substantial tenant of PD that benefits all actors in the classroom setting.

### **Conclusion**

The ongoing professional development of ECE teachers is essential to the growth and development of young children (ChildCare Aware, 2018). This study has shown that supporting ECE teachers that may lack the proper training and skills to provide quality care through evidenced-based professional development and coaching shows promise. By examining the perceptions of ECE teachers' experiences with coaches, researchers, practitioners, and mentor educators can assess the best ways to provide effective professional support and encourage continual learning. Through this real-time coaching and reinforcement of new concepts, ECE



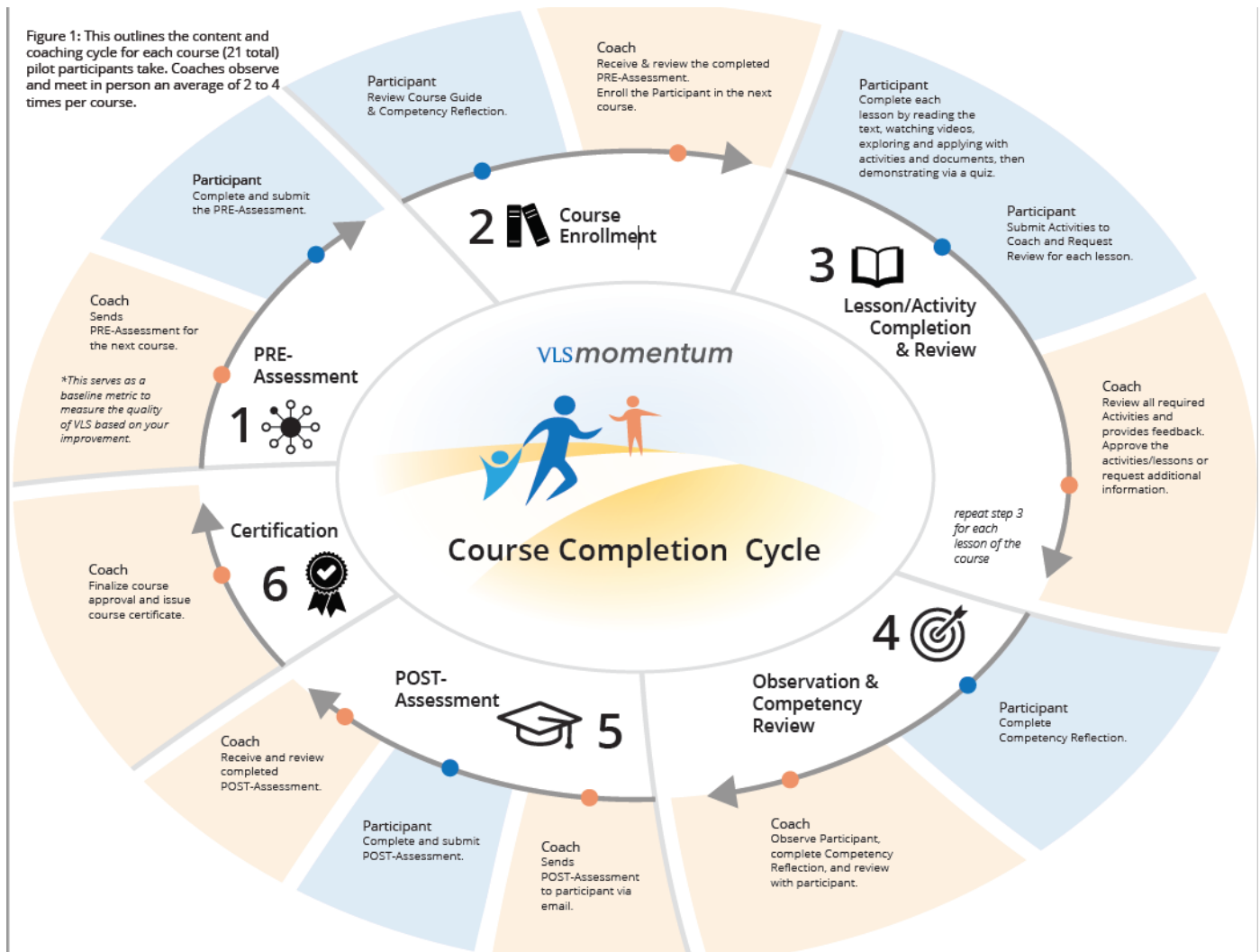
teachers can gain the confidence to effectively build lasting relationships with children that aid them in attaining optimal outcomes.

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Figure 1. VLS Momentum Course Completion Cycle



*Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Teachers from full pilot study (N=77) [41  
Infant/Toddler, 36 Preschool]*

	Mean (SD) / Percent
<i>Teacher Characteristics</i>	
Gender: Female	96%
Age	35 (11)
Black/African American	32%
White/Caucasian	64%
Hispanic/Latinx	4%
Biracial	4%
Years of Experience	4.3 (3.0)
Speaks Multiple Languages	28%

*Table 2. Coaching Posttest Feedback*

Question	% Agree (4)	% Strongly Agree (5)	Total % of 4 & 5	Mean	SD
<b>Perceptions of Intensive Coaching</b>					
In general, the coaching sessions helped me better understand and apply the information from the online training.	21.7	78.3	100	4.78	.42
My coach respected me as a person.	8.7	91.3	100	4.91	.29
My coach asked for my ideas.	8.7	91.3	100	4.91	.29
My coach really cared about my work.	4.3	91.3	95.6	4.78	.85
I learned many things from my coach that will help me be a better teacher.	13	87	100	4.87	.34
My coach helped me see my strengths as a teacher.	13	87	100	4.87	.34
I could rely on my coach to help me when I was stuck.	13	82.6	95.6	4.74	.69
I would not have been as successful at this training without my coach.	30.4	60.9	91.3	4.52	.67
The feedback from my coach was helpful and practical.	13.0	87.0	100	4.87	.34
The observations and conversations with my coach were enjoyable.	8.7	91.3	100	4.91	.29
Goal setting with my coach helped me be a better teacher.	21.7	73.9	95.6	4.70	.56
My coach and I formed a strong professional relationship.	26.1	73.9	100	4.74	.45
In addition to the training, my coach and I discussed other professional and personal challenges.	30.4	69.6	100	4.7	.47
My coach specifically helped prepare me for the CDA process.	34.8	60.9	95.7	4.57	.59
During the COVID-19 (coronavirus) crisis, my coach was particularly helpful.	21.7	73.9	95.6	4.70	.56

*n*=23. Likert items rated on a scale of 1, “Strongly Disagree,” to 5, “Strongly Agree”